

PRESS RELEASE

Congressman John Conyers, Jr.

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Conyers says DOJ Policy Contributes to Climate of Anti-Arab Bias and Calls for Renewed Commitment to Prosecution and Passage of Hate Crimes Law

Representative John Conyers, Jr., the Ranking Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, and lead author of hate crimes legislation in the last three Congresses issued the following statement in light of the FBI's annual hate crimes report finding that incidents targeting people, institutions and businesses identified with the Islamic faith increased from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001:

“These new statistics clearly make the case for passage of hate crimes legislation. If our nation is going to battle terrorism abroad, we must be willing to confront the domestic terrorism of hate crimes, and that means a willingness to make it a federal crime to harm or kill someone because of their race, religion or other factors. I am confident that we have bipartisan majorities in both the House and the Senate to pass such a law, but we need leadership from the White House to make this happen. I will reintroduce this legislation when Congress returns early next year, and plan on making this a principal priority for the next Congress.

The increase in hate crimes against Muslims seen in the FBI report of 1,600 percent is truly shocking. Muslims previously had been among the least-targeted religious group. Hate crimes against people because of their ethnicity or national origin (including people of Middle Eastern origin or descent) -- those not Hispanic, not black and not Asian or American Indian -- more than quadrupled from 354 in 2000 to 1,501 in 2001.

This increase is a direct consequence of the fear and suspicion that followed the Sept. 11 terror attacks. Sadly, the policies promulgated by the Administration and the Department of Justice may have contributed to the climate of distrust of Arab-Americans that is reflected in hate crimes data. Recently disclosed intelligence programs, such as the questioning and monitoring of thousands of Iraqi citizens and Iraqi-Americans, sends the message that these are untrustworthy people, not worthy of basic Constitutional protections.

Current law limits federal jurisdiction to federally protected activities, such as voting, and does not permit federal involvement in a range of cases involving crimes motivated by bias against the victim's sexual orientation, gender or disability. This loophole is particularly significant given the fact that ten states have no hate crime laws on the books, and another 21 states have extremely weak hate crimes laws. This legislation will provide assistance to state and local law enforcement and amend federal law to streamline the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes.

Last Congress, the legislation passed by the Senate by a 57-42 vote as part of the Department of Defense Authorization bill, and was approved by the House in a motion to instruct conferees by a bipartisan vote of 232-192. Unfortunately, the hate crimes legislation was stripped out of the conference due to opposition to the expansion of federal jurisdiction over hate crimes based on sexual orientation.

There is a general climate of fear in the community that people are being singled out for racial profiling in the form of random violence and intrusive government policy based upon their Middle-Eastern national origin and Muslim religion. There is a link between the two in the minds of the Arab and Muslim communities. It is not enough to say that we are some prosecuting crimes at the federal level, these figures argue for an even more vigorous effort to protect a community under siege. This Administration must send a message through its policies that Arabs and Muslims are loyal members of the community who should not be subjected to intolerable deprivations of civil rights. We can do this by passing a national hate crimes laws, and increasing our respect for the rights of Arabs and Muslims in the United States.”